DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 016 PS 014 474

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TITLE Conducive Environments for Infants and Toddlers: Small but Significant Beginnings to "Catch the Rhythm of the Child".
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Association for the Education of Young Children (Cincinnati, OH, May 3-6, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Caregivers; *Day Care Centers; Early Childhood Education; Grouping (Instructional Purposes); *Infants; *Manipulative Materials; *Staff Utilization; Student Teacher Ratio; *Teacher Characteristics; Teacher Developed Materials

ABSTRACT

The caregiver is most important in creating environments for infants and toddlers that "catch the rhythm of the child." Day care centers trying to meet the increasing demand for child care for infants and toddlers cannot have the same staffing patterns and programming for this age group as for older preschool children. Each caregiver should work closely with a given number of children (e.g., four or five children under 2 years of age) to make a day care "family." This arrangement creates a consistent environment in which the caregiver can communicate well with both children and parents. If the unit includes more than one age group, the caregiver can have a variety of relational roles and the toddlers can serve as role models for the infants. The caregiver needs to know the sequence of children's early physical and social development so that he or she can facilitate and support each child's growth. The caregiver must be respectful of children and responsive to their demands and needs. The relationship between caregiver and child should also be reciprocal; each brings something into the life of the other. Such a caregiver will naturally think of many activities to pursue with young children. (To illustrate, six handmade manipulative objects are described in detail). (CB)

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CONDUCIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS: SMALL BUT SIGNIFICANT BEGINNINGS TO "CATCH THE RHYTHM OF THE CHILD."

by

Mona S. Johnston

I like the title of this presentation as it truly reflects the theme of the Midwest AEYC 1984 conference. So often the adults in their respective caregiving roles, direct or indirect, are caught up by the concerns that do not "catch the rhythm of the child." Their concerns primarily tend to focus on money, staffing, legislation and other similar logistical matters. What does it mean, then, to "catch the rhythm of the child" to you and I? As I reflect on it, the theme says to me very eloquently that I must be in tune with the children, their physical, social, emotional and cognitive needs as they are expressed in the reality of here and now each day of their lives. Thus, I must also provide for them (the needs) appropriately, in terms of time and materials and adult nurturing contact and interaction.

Simply stated, "catch the rhythm of the child" has continuous and persistent ramifications for caregivers, whether they are parents, child care professionals or teachers, policy makers or administrators. Let us take a peek at some of the ramifications. I have stated these in the first person so that you may identify with them in the same manner. They are:

1. I shall be a keen observer of each child...his total development from one phase to the other and from one step to the other.

2. I shall continue to provide for each child materials including food, clothing, play environments, supplies and equipment and personnel so that each is provided what he/she should have while under my care.

3. I shall be open, spontaneous and a growing person who is changing and developing in relationship to the children so that I am increasingly in fine tune with the song of growth that children so well sing provided we let them.

4. I shall continue to be in touch with the needs of the caregivers who work under my leadership so that they may also continue to grow in their effectiveness in serving the children with their skills and supportive relationship as they interact with children individually and collectively.

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5. I shall learn to make other leadership bodies aware of the "rhythm of the Child" and direct them in paths so that they may formulate, enforce, and encourage various organizations in the direction of sensitivity and concern for issues impacting children.

6. I will take time and exert effort to keep in touch with myself and work on the areas of personal weaknesses and affirm my strengths.

7. I shall continue to be a source of inspiration to myself, to children I work with, to my coworkers, to other individuals whose lives I touch so that I can continue to work for a better society for all.

8. I will continue to network with others including parents, professionals and community agencies and members to better serve the children.

I almost got carried away with the meanings of the theme for the conference. But, they are innerent within the theme and the ethics of our profession.

Let us look at the meanings of the phrase "conducive environments". Conducive environments are in tune with the "rhythm of the child". Therefore, as a child grows, some elements of the environments will remain constant, while others will need to change in harmony with the changing needs of the growing child. For example, for a very young infant, subdued lighting, cozy room, a crib, and caring and nurturing are appropriate. Large spaces for movement are not really needed. However, the sensitivity of the adult to child's cries or movements are critical. As this infant grows and learns to crawl, restrictive physical environment, caregiver who wants to hold on to the baby all the time and minimal opportunities for interaction with materials and individuals become the roadblocks to growth and development of the child. Yet, the role of the adult as the facilitator becomes redefined to include cuddling, encouraging and protecting since the toddler, in his romance with the world of things, sights, sounds, tastes and relationships tends to be reckless. Thus, the role of the caregiver is to continue to study the child and his changing needs and then to modify the environment, both physical and social.

The urgency for sensitivity has never been so great in the past as it is now. We can visualize the changes in our society very vividly if we compare the lifestyles of our grandparents with that of our own. Many women are working outside the home. Many families are single parent families headed by women. No matter what we hear in the popular media, most women chose to work for economic reasons rather than to get away from their family responsibilities. The reason to work may come in the form of supplementing the family income or supporting the family. Because of the widespread unemployment, many wives are forced to work since their husbands are off the payrolls.

With more women working outside the home, there is a general increase in the need for child care. The biggest increase in demand for child care services is for infants and toddlers. Until recently, most child care, particularly in centers has been offered for children between the ages of 3 and 5 years. Most centers have added child care for 2 years old who are toilet trained. The programming for these two years old is very similar to that of the preschool program.

Programs that offer child care for infants and toddlers tend to continue to have the same programming as for the preschool children. Their recognition of the special needs of these young children is a critical concern. In terms of staffing patterns, some researchers have suggested that all caregivers should mingle and serve all children in the program so that the ties of the infant/toddler with his parents are not weakened. Such an assumption is a faulty one at best. Children who have caring parents already have formed deep attachment to their primary caregivers. They are also capable of forming multiple attachments and their relationship with a caregiver does not have a detrimental effect on the relationship with the mothers. In fact, few significant relationships reinforce each other and strengthen each attachment. What are the implications of caregiving? Each caregiver should work closely with a given number of infants and toddlers. Such a unit, i.e., a caregiver and 4-5 children under two can constitute a day care family within a child care center or a home. (The number may fluctuate slightly depending on the licensing standards.) Such an arrangement does not preclude caregivers from attending to other children if the need arose. It is a matter of having some environmental constancy and interaction density so that the caregiver and her children have an opportunity to learn about each other and to relate to one another. In such an arrangement a caregiver has the opportunity to be in tune with the unique ways of responding and reacting of each of the children in her care and thus, she can realign her own behavior accordingly. Such an arrangement allows children to become increasingly more free and spontaneous with that special caregiver. Thus, the environment develops some consistency...both the physical and the social environment.

Occasionally, it has been assumed that children within such a unit have to be of the same age range. Not true, in a family setting, siblings seldom are of the same age. Each child provides a unique enrichment to the social setting. Similar is true of the child care setting. If a unit has a mix of infants and toddlers, older children serve as the role models for the younger ones, the caregiver has a variety of relational roles to fill. Moreover, the caregiving process becomes a developmental one and there is a balance in the caregiving role. For example, if one caregiver had to care for all infants only there is likely to be an uneven distribution of routine work as well as the danger of boredom.

The caregiver responsible for a specific group of children is in a position to observe them over a period and notice the change in them individually, thus being able to adapt her strategies appropriately for the learning experiences. Such potential tends to produce a sense of personal competence in the caregiver as well as in the children she serves.

An added benefit of the day care family unit proposed is the process of involving parents. It is far less cumbersome and uncomfortable in one caregiver and 5 parents have to relate to one another. The process permits familiarity, continuity that leads to more sharing between the individual parent and the caregiver. Gradually, caregiving becomes "coparenting". The informal and continuing relationship allows both the parent and the caregiver the benefit of each other's insights and experiences to the benefit of the children.

The Process of Caregiving:

The process of caregiving has some significant implications for the caregivers. One of them is the need to understand the pattern of development from infancy onwards so that they can understand, accept and relate to the children they are responsible for in an effective way. Many programs perceive that baby care means feeding, toileting and putting the baby in the crib. This is far from true. Babies are competent who are programmed to respond to human features, voice and touch. They can smell, hear, see, feel and taste. Somehow, because they cannot walk in the upright fashion and speak in our language, we discredit their abilities. In fact, the infants learn a great deal in the firstlyear of life and caregivers must have the understanding and commitment to work with them in a competent fashion. The knowledge and understanding of the sequence of development helps them to design the physical environment to match with the skills of the baby.

In the recent years, the word "stimulation" has received a great deal of attention. There are kits and handbooks available that talk about the stimulation strategies. When we stimulate, we tend to be doing things "to" the baby. Again, the perception of the baby becomes that of an object rather than a person. Many researchers now are stressing the relational aspects of the interaction between the caregiver and the child. In other words, the caregiver takes her cues from the child and responds to them appropriately. She is a facilitator and supporter of the child. Thus, the enrichment process emphasized the BABY rather than a task. As the baby perceives himself as the impactor, a sense of competence occurs. When this is affirmed by the caregiver, roots of self confidence and human communication are built in the baby. Daniel Stern's work may be of special interest to some of you if you are looking into early communication.

The relationship between the caregiver and the children can be described in the three R's. These are:

a. respectful.
b. responsive.
c. reciprocal.*

The meaning of the three R's is critical for one to understand in order to be an effective caregiver. Respectful implies that the caregiver will acknowledge the personhood of the baby and treat him as such in the process of caregiving. How the baby is handled in feeding, diapering and other activities is one essence of respect. The second R refers to the fact that the caregiver will be responsive to the baby...his comfort, discomfort; his demands and needs. This principle imbeds itself in the first one. The reciprocal aspect refers to the investment of the caregiver of herself in the relationship with the baby. Such a notion means that the caregiver has a unique relationship with each one of her children and that each brings something into the life of the other.

If such a meaingful relationship comes about, the caregiver becomes a key person in the lives of the children who learn to relate to the physical world, social world while learning to know themselves as competent persons.

What kinds of activities to pursue with young children will come very naturally to such a caregiver described above. However, some sample ideas are shared with you as follows:

1. Benny: Bear shaped pouch made of fleecy fabric with detachable ears and eyes of sewed on buttons with button holes. When buttons are undone, the bear goes to sleep. The bear has a zippered mouth that is lined with red fabric. Inside Benny are red gingham fish with numbers on them. This toy can be used from infancy through preschool years. For very small babies, the touch of Benny is a nice sensation. A one year old can carry and cuddle Benny. He can feed benny the fish, pull off the ears, etc. The caregiver's imagination is the limit.

2. Single piece puzzles of corrugated cardboard: Covered with contact paper, they are nice manipulative objects for children to work with. The shape of the bright sun provides something bright for babies to look at. Each piece is self correctives.

3. Book with a Knob: This is a play item made up from two smooth pieces of wood, 4 x 8, covered with fabric of different textures. Inside, a new picture can be posted. As the child lifts the top with the knob, there are some interesting results he gets to watch, e.g., the picture inside.

4. Samples of a variety of mobiles made from styrofoam balls, plastic eggs and yarn pom-poms.

5. Cardboard box clown: The children feed the clown in the opening for the mouth and lift the lid to retrieve the objects. Various textures, colors and shapes tend to maintain the interest and encourage exploration by the child.

6. Felt Hanging: This hanging can have the green background with a barn and the farm scene in bright colors. There is a sun in the sky and a few clouds. There are pockets in which the stuffed animals can be placed and moved around. This hanging can be placed by the crib area or closer to the ground for crawlers to touch. Some of the animals have a little noise maker in them. As the child touches, they make a mild sound.

You may have ideas of your own that you can adapt. These were just to give you an idea or two. I know you have "caught the rhythm of the child."